On the connection between Humour, Irony, Tragedy and Enchantment, the Intellect and the Emotions, and Consciousness

The first part of this essay is based on a public presentation given at the East-West Center in Honolulu on May 27th,1983, as my contribution to a series of talks with the theme "The world as representation" (the theme of my contribution was more like "The world as mis-representation"!) The second and third parts subsequently evolved in a natural way out of the first.

Peter Tchamitch
January 2006

Part 1: Humour and Irony: "The world isn´t as it 'should' be"

Instinctively, one has a tendency to see humour as "The world isn't as it 'should' be" in a refreshing way: it is "insane" in a "nice" way, making the world more interesting, less predictable and more human. Irony, on the other hand, is normally seen as "The world isn't as it 'should' be" in a "nasty" way: the irony in "the irony of fate", for example, is almost by definition malevolent, with "events and states of affairs in seeming mockery of the intended or ideal" (Oxford English Dictionary, under "irony") in other words different in a perverse, nasty way.

Although there is something to be said for this, it is by no means the whole truth of the matter. For a start, humour isn't all that "nice"—according to Arthur Koestler in his article on Humour and Wit in the Encyclopaedia Brittanica (1974 ed.), most people who've thought about it have realized that humour is in actual fact a manifestation of aggressiveness, even though Koestler says that in "civilized humour" the aggressive

element is sublimated or no longer conscious. Irony, furthermore, isn't all that "nasty": according to the Encyclopaedia Brittanica, verbal irony, for example, arises from "a sophisticated and resigned awareness of the contrast between what is and what ought to be, and expresses a controlled pathos without sentimentality".

This having been said, there´s no question that the absurd incongruity or ridiculousness that constitutes the heart of both humour and irony isn´t absurdly incongruous or ridiculous in humour in the same way as it is in irony—so wherein lies, actually, the difference?! The answer to that is "baked into" the formula "The world isn't as it 'should' be": the bottom line with respect to the difference is that in the case of irony the world seems to have the upper hand or control, or at least the initiative, whereas the opposite is true in the case of humour. Someone will of course be wondering "What's funny about having the 'initiative' against the world?" (for some strange reason, no one asks the corresponding question about irony: please see below on "self-irony" also) and here we need to first recognize that there is a kind of game going on between man and world, where that which is most absurd or ridiculous often seems to be that which is most meaningful or "say" the most. This applies to both humour and irony, which constitute a polarity—and it is extremely important to realize that they actually do this, as opposed to humour and "seriousness", for example! It is commonly held that levity or non-seriousness is at the heart of humour, and apart from the fact that this begs the question "What´s funny about non-seriousness?", one could also question what levity is in itself: the fact that humour is normally associated with levity, and irony with heaviness, is really no more than a sub-variant of the idea, mentioned at the outset, that humour is "nice" and irony "nasty". The concept of charm will be found in what follows to be far more powerful than that of levity. And as for "self-irony", this is nothing more than part of the game going on between man and world: to talk of self-irony at all shows that one intuitively knows what the game is all about.

It must further be recognized that humour and irony are primarily intellectual phenomena insofar as the most important prerequisite for and ingredient in a sense of humour and irony is actually intelligence, and I would like to spell out right away that what I mean

by intelligence is that which is everywhere known as “creative intelligence”. Furthermore: as far as I am concerned “creative intelligence” is interchangeable with “imaginative intelligence” and even—why not?!—with “creative imagination”. Anyway, it seems clear that it is the intellect which has the power and prerogative of creativity (and that this is also it´s primary power), and that our (combined) sense of humour and irony —and, by direct implication, of the interplay between them—is our most advanced way of representing the world as a whole.

The next highest common denominator of humour and irony (after “The world isn´t as it ‘should’ be”) is thus that they actually reveal the truth, indeed one could assert that humour and irony have to reveal something which is true in order to be humorous or ironic. Now what I mean by truth is a kind of “sophisticated pragmatic” truth—a truth which is as good as we can make it, until someone comes along and overpowers it…the point is, though, that this can’t be done any odd how: the creativity in humour and irony lies in being able to represent the world in an absurd way while simultaneously indicating why one has chosen just that particular “mis--representation”. The fact that the dividing line between humour and irony is often quite subtle doesn’t mean that they are thereby any more “the same thing”—quite the contrary! It is simply that where there are multiple levels of humour and irony in the same situation this is where you are bound to have the subtlest—in other words best—humour and irony. It should also be obvious that the fact than man can ironize over the world and, conversely, that the world can “create” humorous situations, by no means contradicts the basic definition: it’s just a question of which role or what position one sees oneself as having in the world—these are nothing more than the basic rules of the game—and the best humour and irony does indeed contain an implicit recognition or statement of “the state of the relationship”…

Two small stories might illustrate this. In the first, imagine that a man in Europe is talking via mobile phone with his wife who is in the US. Both of them are acutely aware of the high cost of such calls and both are wasting a lot of time trying to induce each other into making the call as quick and as to the point as possible...one has to imagine something along the lines of a Monty Python sketch: the situation starts out as something

at least half-normal only to "lose it" more and more…finally the wife screams: "What the hell is this conversation about anyway?", upon which the husband (John Cleese, one of course imagines!) in a fit of rage smashes his phone into bits while shouting: "Conversation?!—what conversation?!—there is no conversation, no conversation, no conversation…no…"

The other little story is the well-known Swedish "Finnish-joke" where a Swede and a Finn are on the deck of a ferry taking them over to Finland. In total silence they are passing a bottle of Vodka between them, each taking long and drawn-out "hits"…Finally, when it is the Swede's turn to drink he thinks to himself that one might as well be a little sociable so he turns to the Finn and says "Skål". The Finn then gives him a strange look and says "Are we going to drink, or are we going to talk?"…the idea of the story is of course to have a little fun at the expense of the Finns and the Finn's answer was supposedly "symbolic" of the Finns. But if the Swede had said something corny such as "How pleasant it is to be out on the deck enjoying our drinks!", then anyone can see that the Finn's answer changes character completely and is now sophisticatedly ironic and also very intelligent, even brilliant, since one obviously can't talk with anyone making a comment like that!

On an even more subtle level it will be recognized that even the Swede's original "Skål" didn't deserve a much better answer than he got, so the whole joke backfires on the Swedes…unless of course the "Skål" was meant to be that trite!…which could have made the Finn's answer even more brilliant!…it might seem that we have some sort of infinite regress problem here but in Part 2 which follows it should become clear that this is not the case, or rather the problem is overcome altogether. In any case, the small stories above should hopefully have shown that it is the entire situation—ultimately the whole state of the world and of our relationship with it—that has to be grasped, and here I would like to reiterate what was said earlier about humour and irony being our most advanced way of representing the world as a whole.

The relationship between the intellect and the emotions: Humour, Irony, Tragedy and Enchantment

I said at the outset that there was "something to be said" for the idea that humour and irony were "nice" and "nasty" respectively, but I then went on to say that this was "by no means the whole truth of the matter", and the idea is actually simplistic and misleading. Now I also said earlier that the most important ingredient in a sense of humour and irony is intelligence, but it is doubtless so that if we expand the system to include the emotions we arrive at a much better total picture of "that which is most meaningful or 'says' the most" (please see earlier on the game going on between man and world). In general it is of extreme importance that that the relationship between the intellect and the emotions be defined without hidden pre-conceptions or biases being allowed to creep in, while at the same time one bites the bullet and makes a real attempt to explain how it is that they seem to be inseparable elements of consciousness.

I would like to claim that we can achieve exactly this by expanding the humour and irony —system and introducing a highest common denominator equivalent to "The world isn't as it 'should' be" which would be something like "Out of this world", and an equivalent polarity principle consisting of the primary emotional realities of charm (attraction) on the one hand and horror (repulsion) on the other. In my view, horror and charm must lie behind what we understand as "tragedy" on the one hand and what could be called "enchantment" on the other. Ideas to the effect that it is tragedy and comedy (or humour: they are interchangeable here) which constitute a polarity are philosophically and psychologically incorrect: the "opposite" of tragedy is certainly not comedy, rather it is enchantment, if anything. Now we know that Aristotle (in the "Poetics") rejects the notion that shock or repulsion are the emotions that are primarily to be associated with tragedy, and he puts all his weight behind pity and fear. I am by no means saying that this is wrong, rather I would like to claim that starting from primitive horror and charm the emotions are developed through different stages of refinement so that our most advanced

emotions are those, precisely, of tragedy and enchantment, in a manner equivalent to how humour and irony were earlier said to be “our most advanced way of representing the world as a whole”.

I see no contradiction in the notion that the mind and heart (here taken to mean the intellect and emotions and nothing else) can go their separate ways, so to speak, while at the same time successively establishing relations; on the contrary, it is thanks to the capacity for independent refinement on the part of the intellect and the emotions—which I claim that they have—that they can relate to each other and also do so. Now certain individuals seem to have obscure motives to deliberately obscure the relationship between the intellect and the emotions: these individuals are prone to affecting a form of “inaccessibility” which they imagine enables them to insinuate that they alone have the mysterious form of “right feeling” and/or “secret higher knowledge” necessary to understand real humour and irony. The point that they have missed is that if one has really achieved this then there is no longer any need for “inaccessibility” or to insinuate anything, because that which on a high level is of necessity “up-front”, as will soon become clear. Now since these insinuations often take the form of “knowing” half-smiles or wry smiles, together with half-laughs or chuckles, I would like to take this opportunity to remind the individuals in question of the well-known saying that “There is nothing more stupid than a stupid laugh”…(not that I by any means wish to imply that “half-laughs and chuckles” are the only possible forms of stupid laughter, nor that they are always stupid).

Another well-known—and brilliant!—aphorism is Horace Walpole´s “The world is a tragedy to those who feel but a comedy to those who think”. It soon becomes clear that the aphorism is not so much about the world (and certainly not about different kinds of people!) as about the relationship between the mind and heart (which is on the right track): the total phenomena, whatever they may be, the “absurdities”, that the intellects interprets as comedy are interpreted by the emotions as tragedy, and in particular one gets the impression that what is really being said is that an “elevated” mind and an “elevated” heart will each understand the other’s interpretation but will each “choose” anyway to

interpret as it does for its own reasons. This is also highly valid, but we then get back to the question of what tragedy and comedy actually are, and here the aphorism seems to be simply stating that an “elevated” mind and heart will understand “elevated” tragedy and comedy (which is correct), while also strongly implying that there exists a proper, “elevated”, balance between our minds and hearts.

Concerning the question of what tragedy and comedy actually are, when all is said and done tragedy and comedy (humour) and irony and enchantment are their respective position (positioning) in the expanded model (please see the graphic representation at the end). To spell this out further: the increasing refinement in the connections between humour, irony, tragedy and enchantment is made possible by the rarefication of the intellect and the emotions, and we can now see that HITE are simply the four points on the outer ring of the expanded model where the intellect and emotions can and do understand each other best. An “elevated” mind and heart is characterized by a high degree of rarefication—this is obvious—as well as an aesthetically pleasing balance between them, in other words a balance which is elegant, which expresses character and which strives for self-evidence. Now that the intellect and the emotions understand each other best at the HITE-points doesn´t mean that HITE consist of a mish-mash of various intellectual and emotional components, rather our sense of humour and irony develops in phases—successively as relations between heart and mind are established—in such a way that the mind takes the heart more and more into account, and similarly, our sense of tragedy and enchantment develops in various phases where at each phase the heart takes the mind more and more into account. A good example of this is the manner in which humour and enchantment are related: there is certainly a strong connection or special relationship that develops between humour and enchantment, precisely—I have indicated as much by the double lines in the diagram—but this isn´t on account of their becoming less and less distinct—on the contrary! The bottom line is that humour is a creation (and re-creation) of the intellect—and created (and re-created) naturally in accordance with the positioning and balance of the various elements of the HITE-system as it has come to develop.

To the final piece in the puzzle, diametrically opposed in the diagram to tragicomedy, I thought it would be appropriate to give the name charmed irony. Now everyone knows what tragicomedy is, but what is "charmed irony", apart from the opposite of tragicomedy? It might be appropriate to try and give an example here, in this case of situational charmed irony: An individual who is experiencing a personal crisis goes to see a psychologist but unfortunately the latter doesn't handle the situation very well and makes some highly inappropriate remarks and gets deeper and deeper into a mess; to slightly adapt Sir Walter Scott:

"O, what a tangled web weave ye,
Practish´ners of psychologie!"

If we further imagine that this prompts the patient to explain a thing or two about life and about how people work to the psychologist we would undoubtedly have an ironic situation. If the psychologist was actually "helped" by this, we would have an extra ironic twist. If the patient himself started to feel much better after discovering that several of his own comments were highly relevant to his own case we would have something like situational charmed irony.

Now that the situation seems to fortuitously work out in our (the patient's) favour is part of the picture but it would be just as "simplistic and misleading" (please see the first sentence of Part 2) to thereby interpret charmed irony as "nice irony" as it would be to characterise regular "uncharmed" irony as nasty.

If charmed irony can be seen as "nice irony" then one might as well see tragicomedy as "nasty humour", which is obviously nonsense...the correct view, in my opinion, is that "tragicomedy" relates to any state of affairs "which would be funny if it weren´t so tragic", and correspondingly, "charmed irony" relates to any state of affairs "which would be ironic if it weren´t so enchanted".

Part 3: Consciousness as the "HITE-diamond"

Regarding the requirement that we should make a real attempt to explain how it is that the intellect and the emotions seem to be inseparable elements of consciousness, the idea here is that consciousness is exactly represented by the outer ring in the graphic representation (the entire outer ring, I would like to stress). It seems to me that one could think of it as a kind of resonance or reinforcement associated with the establishment of relations between the intellect and the emotions—that there can be any such relations in the first place is a consequence of the process of rarefication, which in turn is the consequence of an outward-pressing or expanding force. Since it is claimed that the intellect and the emotions somehow interact to give rise to consciousness, each by itself can´t indeed be conscious in the same way as they are together, rather each is always "pushing the envelope" (represented by the arrows in the graphic representation) and each represents a special kind of searching force or power evolved over eons of striving to deal with or make sense of the world, and indeed to transcend both it and our own limitations. Now it might be imagined that this would only apply to the intellect, but as I have earlier argued the emotions certainly can´t be relegated to the status of primitive reactions and impulses but are rather refined mental phenomena, or at least have the potential to be refined, and it will be recognized that they certainly constitute a form of judgement (refined searching and testing) of the world, as does the intellect, and that the highest common denominators ("The world isn´t as it 'should' be" and "Out of this world") clearly denote the most advanced level of this for the intellect and the emotions respectively.

The intellect and the emotions are not "aspects" (or ideas to that effect) of consciousness. To the possible objection that there has to be something that is conscious at the outset for there to be a heart and/or mind at all, I think that for sure there has to be something that is potentially capable of consciousness, a week-old infant, for example, but no one could possibly say that the infant is as conscious as an adult, or as developed intellectually or emotionally, nor that the latter develops out of the former… consciousness by definition

represents the end product of everything whích has been achieved to date (including "collective achievements" in the form of the evolution of the human brain)…of course once a certain level of consciousness has already been attained any further expansion starts from that level, so it might appear that the intellect and the emotions spring from consciousness, but as a matter of principle it has to be the other way round.

Initially, in a system that is hardly expanded at all, one has what could be called a proto-mind and proto-heart combining to form a proto-consciousness. Even animals have this level of mind, heart and consciousness, however it is clear that they very soon reach their maximum potential (by the way, I take "sentience" more or less as a given, starting with the higher animals). In the case of human beings, one sooner or later begins to see the emergence of a more advanced level of development in the form of a proto-sense of horror and charm as well as of what was earlier referred to as "man has initiative" vs. "world has initiative" (please see graphic representation). Subsequently, and at any point actually, the transformations that preceded this state are retained, it seems to me, in the form of subconscious memories—and the subconscious in general is easily shown in this system to be everything, or at least a large part of everything (there is an indeterminate boundry area) inside the outer ring, simply! It is furthermore doubtlessly so that the aforementioned subconscious memories have a considerable influence upon the nature and power of further rarefications, as does of course the will-power and total potential of the individual.

So, instead of referring to consciousness as "the entire outer ring of interactions between the intellect and the emotions where H, I, T and E are the points where the intellect and the emotions understand each other best", one could simply call it the "sense of HITE", as long as it is understood that this is a way of expressing that consciousness is not some kind of mish-mash of the senses of Humour and Irony and Tragedy and Enchantment (still less of what one might uncritically assume these to be), and that it is the interaction between the intellect and the emotions which is the operative factor. This basic, or ordinarily rarefied, "sense of HITE" is a lot more specific and informative than something like "the feeling of being alive", which normally passes as an approximate

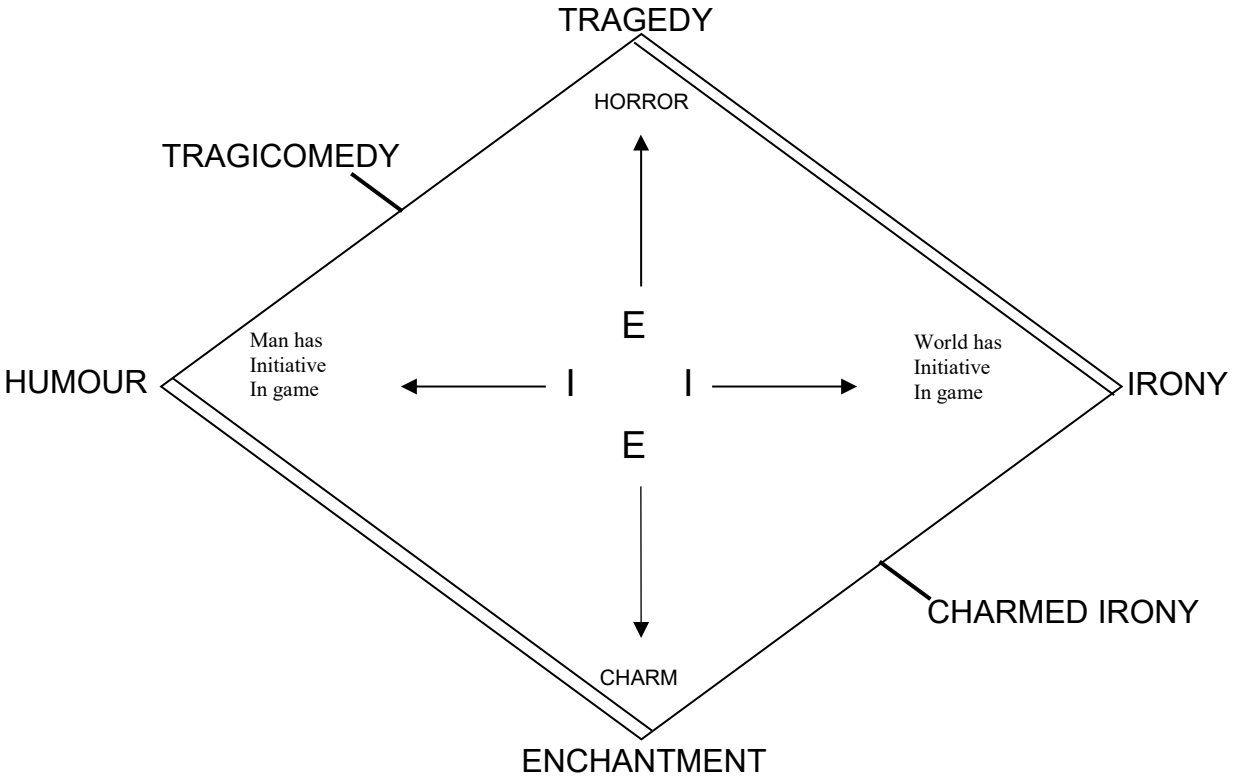
synonym for consciousness, and please bear with me for spelling out here that the "sense of HITE"-thesis is absolutely not that consciousness is some kind of basic or general awareness upon which an advanced or specific sense of HITE is superimposed.

Similarly, what normally passes as higher consciousness—some kind of "intense feeling of being alive"—is far less coherent and technically accurate than "a highly rarefied sense of HITE". This latter—which could be designated elevated consciousness—is also directly related to the experience we get from (the greatest) art, music and literature, and there´s no question that this is an authentic experience of the H,I,T and E of life and of existence, whereas in the former case the intense feeling of being alive could be just about anything and in many cases is probably an illusion.

In principle there is no difference between looking into another person´s face and eyes and looking into a created work of art, music or literature: everything so far attained or worked out should (hopefully) have been put into them. One can actually see the cutting edge of the sense of HITE concentrated in the eyes and written on the face of any person with any character.

In some works or individuals it may be that the points of contact or cutting edge that another system can "lock into" are rarefied to the point of sublimity but this doesn´t mean that it´s harder to lock into such a work or individual—on the contrary it´s easier—provided the system doing the locking into is also highly rarefied. It would not be absurd to imagine here some analogue to the Turing Test which would obviously be, in the light of the above, some form of "HITE-test"…

Graphic representation of the "HITE-diamond" overleaf


TRAGEDY
HORROR
TRAGICOMEDY
E
Man has
Initiative
In game
HUMOUR
I
I
World has
Initiative
In game
IRONY
E
CHARMED IRONY
CHARM
ENCHANTMENT